

UNDERSTANDING  
THE  
SACRAMENTS

*Anointing*

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Published by Liturgical Press, Collegeville, Minnesota.  
www.litpress.org

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Design by David Manahan, O.S.B.  
Photos: cover, pages 11, 13, The Crosiers; pages 6, 22, Dreamstime.com; pages 8, 16, 19, iStockphoto.com; page 20, W. P. Wittman.

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ISBN 978-0-8146-3193-5

# What Is a Sacrament?

Most Catholics recognize that sacraments are an important part of life in the church. They see them as significant moments that mark transitions in life. They bring their babies to be baptized and send their second graders to prepare for First Communion. They come to the church to be married and ask for the anointing when someone is seriously ill.

Sacraments, however, are much more than mileposts in the spiritual life. The Second Vatican Council (1962–65) called for a renewal of the liturgy that included revising all the sacraments. These revisions call us to rethink our understanding of these basic actions that shape our identity in the church. In their first document, the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, issued in 1963, the council fathers spoke of the importance of the sacraments for the Christian life:

The purpose of the sacraments is to sanctify people, to build up the body of Christ, and, finally, to worship God. Because they are signs they also belong in the realm of instruction. They not only presuppose faith, but by words and objects they also nourish, strengthen, and express it. That is why they are called sacraments of faith. They do, indeed, confer grace, but, in addition, the very act of celebrating them is most effective in making people ready to receive this grace to their profit, to worship God duly, and to practice charity.

It is, therefore, of the greatest importance that the faithful should easily understand the symbolism of the sacraments and eagerly frequent those sacraments which were instituted to nourish the Christian life (no. 59).

Helping people to readily understand the sacramental signs is the goal of this series of booklets.

Though this booklet focuses on the sacrament of the anointing of the sick, there are basic principles that can help us to understand all the sacraments, for they share some fundamental characteristics.

*Oil is a symbol of healing and of the presence of the Holy Spirit.*

## **SACRAMENTS ARE HUMAN ACTIVITIES**

First, the sacraments are human activities. We often think of the sacraments in terms of the elements of creation that we use: water, oil, bread and wine, etc. Yet the sacraments are better understood as the actions that we do with those elements, and those actions are all basic human gestures. We wash bodies, anoint foreheads, eat bread and drink wine, touch and caress the sick, lay on hands as a gesture of conferring power, etc. These human actions become the means of encountering the Lord.

These actions have become rituals; we follow familiar patterns of movement and gesture and recite the official words of the rite. We perform these rituals as our ancestors did. Nonetheless, rituals are revised and updated from time to time to keep them fresh and true to their original purpose.

*Scripture clarifies the symbols we use. "Is anyone among you sick? He should summon the presbyters of the Church, and they should pray over him and anoint him with oil in the name of the Lord" (Jas 5:14).*

Our ritual actions are symbolic, giving us a real and concrete way to experience or express something that is otherwise abstract. A symbol contains the reality it expresses. A kiss, for example, somehow contains the love it expresses, though it does not exhaust that love. So, too, the eucharistic meal contains the presence of Jesus, though it does not exhaust that presence.

All the sacraments also rely on the word of God. The prayers and formulas of the rituals have been drawn from the Bible, and the celebrations always include a formal proclamation of the word of God. The word clarifies the meaning of the symbols we use. Proclaiming God's word in the celebration also reminds us that our actions are always a response to what God has done for us.

## **SACRAMENTS ARE ACTIONS OF THE CHURCH COMMUNITY**

The ritual actions that we carry out in the sacraments are always communal actions. This may be the most important realization in our renewed understanding of the sacraments. They are the actions of the church community, not just of

the presider or the recipient. As the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy puts it: “It is very much the wish of the church that all the faithful should be led to take that full, conscious, and active part in liturgical celebrations which is demanded by the very nature of the liturgy” (no. 14). Liturgy is the public worship of the church in its various forms. Though we may celebrate around an individual or a group of people receiving a sacrament, we all celebrate the sacrament together. A sacrament is the action of the church, and its meaning and effects are not limited to those around whom we celebrate.

One primary effect of any sacrament is to form us for mission. Each sacrament, in its own way, strengthens us to carry on the mission of Christ in the world today. Sacraments, then, are necessary to the life of the community and the furtherance of its mission. They make the church what Christ intends it to be, and they make each of us what Christ intends us to become.

### **SACRAMENTS ARE THE ACTION OF CHRIST**

At the same time, because the church is the Body of Christ, the action of a sacrament is also the action of Christ. The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy puts it this way: “By his power he is present in the sacraments, so that when anybody baptizes it is really Christ himself who baptizes” (no. 7).

The church has long taught that the power of a sacrament is not dependent on the ability or holiness of the priest, bishop, or deacon presiding. The sacrament is effective even if the minister is unworthy or sinful. It does not ultimately depend on the minister, for it is Christ who acts through the gathered community, which is his Body.

The encounter with Christ in the sacraments is possible only through faith. That is why baptism is the first sacrament and the precondition for all the others. It is the sacrament of initial faith, which is a response to God’s grace calling a person to belief. The sacraments express our faith and also nourish and strengthen faith, because they bring us into contact with the living Christ.

The tradition speaks of sacraments giving grace. That is ultimately a way of saying that they bring us into contact with Christ and enable us to deepen our friendship with the

Lord. Grace is, at root, that relationship, and the encounter with Christ in a sacrament deepens that friendship.

Sacraments are a part of our relationship with God, a part of our faith life. They express what God is already doing in our lives and move us further along the road of conversion and spiritual growth. Sacraments should never be viewed as isolated moments in our lives. They depend on a process that leads up to the moment of celebration and flows from that moment into our future. Sacraments require preparation on the part of the individual and on the part of the community. Sacraments affect the life of the individual and the community far beyond the celebration itself.

To summarize, sacraments are:

- human activities
- that have become symbolic ritual actions,
- clarified by the word of God,
- celebrated by the church community,
- recognized as the actions of Christ,
- that deepen our relationship with God
- and strengthen us to carry on the mission of Jesus.



## Anointing Sacrament of the Sick

When Jesus walked the earth, one of his most frequent ways of proclaiming the arrival of the kingdom of God was through acts of healing. Roughly half of Mark's Gospel, for example, is made up of healing stories. In healing the sick, Jesus proclaimed both the power and the love of God present in our midst. His healings were

signs of the arrival of God's kingdom in human history, powerfully eloquent signs to ancient people who often linked illness with evil spirits. Jesus also commissioned his disciples to go out and heal the sick, and after his death and resurrection they continued his ministry of healing, as the Acts of the Apostles tells us.

From the very beginning, then, the church has been involved in ministry to the sick and the dying. Throughout the centuries the Christian community has always cared for the sick, both through liturgical prayer and through acts of service. The church has founded countless hospitals for the sick and hospices for the dying, for example, perhaps more than any other organization in human history.

The sacrament of the anointing of the sick is part of this wide-ranging ministry to the sick. Use of the sacrament, however, has varied significantly throughout its history. For centuries it was considered a sacrament for the dying, and people (mistakenly) refer to it as Last Rites even today.

Some confusion is understandable because the Second Vatican Council and the subsequent reform of the sacraments made a significant shift in our understanding of the sacrament of anointing. The council noted in its Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy that this sacrament may “more properly be called the ‘anointing of the sick’” and stressed that it is not reserved only to those who are at the point of death (no. 73). This marked the beginning of a recovery of the original understanding of this sacrament, a process that has been furthered by the new rite for anointing issued in 1972. This sacrament is no longer called Extreme Unction or the Last Rites but the Anointing of the Sick, and the shift in name indicates a vast shift in both pastoral practice and the theology of the sacrament.

*This sacrament is no longer called Extreme Unction or Last Rites, because it is intended for all those who are seriously ill or weakened by age, not just for the dying.*

## A Brief Look at History

Since the recent reforms of this sacrament are really a recovery of its original purpose, it is helpful to look at the development of the anointing of the sick in the history of the church. Actually, anointing with oil is older than the church itself, since it was a ritual used in the Old Testament.

Kings, priests, and prophets were anointed as a sign of their special mission and the gift of God's spirit to help them. In a similar fashion, various objects used in worship were consecrated by anointing. Oil was also used for treating wounds, healing the sick, and preparing the dead for burial. It was an item in common use in the ancient world, employed in such diverse activities as cooking, athletic rubdowns, cosmetics, and lighting. Because of its many uses, oil became a symbol with several meanings that still come through when it is used in ritual activities. Thus the use of oil speaks of strength and health, of light and beauty, of consecration and God's spirit.

It is not surprising, then, that Jesus and his followers also made use of oil in religious ways. There are two main references to anointing the sick in the New Testament that have been influential in the history of the sacrament. The first is Mark 6:13: "They drove out many demons, and they anointed with oil many who were sick and cured them." This was part of the disciples' ministry of preaching and healing, an extension of Jesus' own ministry.

The more influential passage, however, comes from the Letter of James, which places care of the sick in the context of other pastoral situations:

Is anyone among you suffering? He should pray. Is anyone in good spirits? He should sing praise. Is anyone among you sick? He should summon the presbyters of the church, and they should pray over him and anoint [him] with oil in the name of the Lord, and the prayer of faith will save the sick person, and the Lord will raise him up. If he has committed any sins, he will be forgiven. Therefore, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The fervent prayer of a righteous person is very powerful. (5:13-16)

Several points are worth noting in this passage. James speaks of the presbyters, who were the leaders of the community, the council of elders. Presbyters later became known as priests, and this passage was the

